



## Tips for Disaster Responders: **CULTURAL AWARENESS WHEN WORKING IN INDIAN COUNTRY POST DISASTER**

In this tip sheet, we respectfully use the term “Native Americans” to describe the hundreds of tribes, reservations, pueblos, and villages throughout the United States. Know that all tribes are unique, with highly individual cultures, governance, and belief systems. Find out the best way to offer response assistance for the tribe with which you are working.

When responding to a traumatic event, such as a natural or human-caused disaster in Indian Country, it is important not only to tailor the response efforts to address the event but also to understand the impact of the historical trauma experienced by Native Americans.<sup>1</sup> Historical trauma is the cumulative, multigenerational, collective experience of emotional and psychological injury in communities and their descendants.<sup>2,3</sup> This type of trauma can complicate individual and community recovery.

Some tribes do not have a word for “disaster,” and refer to disasters differently than non-native cultures do. Some may feel that saying the word “disaster” may bring harm to their community. It is important to pay attention to how members of the local tribal community refer to disasters and other traumatic events and use the same words and phrases they use. It is also important to remember that each Native American tribe is a sovereign nation with a unique history and political status. This tip sheet can help disaster behavioral health responders like you and your colleagues learn about working with Native

Americans before, during, and after a traumatic event.

### CULTURAL VALUES

While every tribe, reservation, pueblo, rancheria, and village is unique, several general cultural values are shared by the majority of Native American communities:

- Importance is placed on harmony with the environment.<sup>4</sup>
- Each person is seen as part of a larger system.<sup>5</sup>
- Elders and other community leaders are respected for their knowledge and wisdom.<sup>6</sup>
- Children are the future and are to be protected and supported.
- Helping others is more important than helping oneself. A community approach to healing is emphasized in most cases.
- Prayer and traditions are important facets of life and are sacred and must be protected.

### TYPES OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Again, keeping in mind that every tribe is different, there are certain types of traumatic events that are likely to occur in Indian Country, including the following:

- A single event (a disaster, vehicular accident, rape, suicide of a loved one)
- Prolonged traumatic experiences (e.g., forced assimilation, historical events such as removal from homelands)

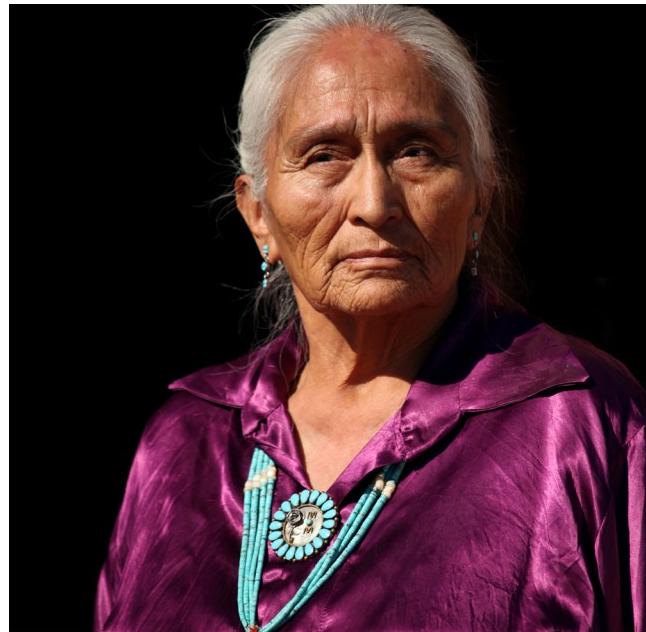
- Cumulative effects (high rates of and exposure to violence, such as domestic violence and community violence)<sup>7</sup>
- Personal events that impact several generations (forced relocation—both in general and to boarding schools—massacres)<sup>8</sup>
- Youth suicides and multiple suicides<sup>9</sup>
- Violent deaths (homicide, suicide, unintentional injuries) and accidents
- Multiple experiences of victimization

## AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

After surviving a disaster or traumatic event, people may feel dazed or even numb. They may also feel sad, helpless, or anxious. It is important to normalize the type of emotional reactions to trauma that many people experience. It is not unusual for tribal members, or any people who have gone through trauma, to experience bad memories or dreams and trouble sleeping, eating, or paying attention. It is not unusual for people to withdraw socially or relapse into alcohol or drug misuse if that was an issue prior to the traumatic event. These are all common and expected reactions to stress among adults and adolescents alike.<sup>10</sup>

## RESPONSE EFFORTS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

When working in Indian Country after a traumatic event, it is important to remember that Native American entities have a long history of being told what they “should” do and that they need to change their ways.<sup>11</sup> Such direction is unwelcome because of past history with some non-native people who may have been well-meaning but imposed their ways upon the tribe, or even betrayed them in significant ways.<sup>12</sup> In the spirit of preparedness, you can offer your best in disaster response and recovery by building partnerships and getting to know trusted tribal liaisons such as a tribal emergency manager. Remember, you are a guest in a sovereign nation; so by showing respect and working with a tribal liaison, you will increase your



professional credibility. Community members place more value on who you are and how you develop relationships than on your degrees or professional qualifications. Connecting as a person is critical to success. Get to know their history—both traumatic and otherwise—so that when a disaster occurs, you are more likely to be seen as a resource and can work effectively with disaster survivors. While you may not always agree with the beliefs and customs of the tribe you are working with, it is critical to be respectful of their choices, culture, and values.

## USE OF TRADITIONAL TEACHINGS

It is important to respect and support the values of the tribe while emphasizing personal and community responsibility in disaster recovery. Building a relationship and connection between you and members of the community is a good way to demonstrate respect for traditional values.

- Before an event occurs, you may consider seeking the wisdom of community leaders. The words and phrases used to describe mental and emotional health differ in tribal communities. It is important to know how your local community refers to these

concepts before you meet with the leaders. Keeping in mind that every tribe is different and knowing your community's disaster risks, you may choose to ask leaders some of these questions to help you build a relationship and connection:

- What is the leaders' sense of their community's physical and emotional well-being?<sup>13</sup>
- What strengths do community members have that can help them cope with and overcome their problems?
- How have leaders helped community members overcome past trauma?<sup>14</sup>
- How are children in the community taught coping and problem-solving skills?



Just after an event occurs, you may wish to ask community leaders if they can talk to residents about the event in a way that shows how it relates to their tribe's creation stories or other traditional teaching stories. This technique can be used as a way to explain why things happen and lessons that can be learned from the experience. It is important to have a respected leader tell the story with the approval of tribal leadership.

## USE OF TALKING CIRCLES

Many tribes have found talking circles to be one effective way of bringing people together in a quiet, respectful, and safe place where they can share their experiences and learn positive coping skills from each other. Consider asking if talking circles are used in the community and whether there are community members who typically lead a talking circle. If this is a practice that is familiar and acceptable to the local tribal community, request that a disaster behavioral health responder be allowed to participate in the talking circle. The local leader and disaster behavioral health responder can discuss the issues to bring to the group and how these will be presented (e.g., talking stick, feather).

These tips, in combination with getting to know the Native American emergency management and tribal liaisons you plan to work with before a disaster occurs, will help ensure that you help provide a coordinated and effective response to any disaster or traumatic event.

**TIPS FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS:  
CULTURAL AWARENESS WHEN WORKING IN INDIAN COUNTRY POST DISASTER**

- 1 BigFoot, D., & Schmidt, S. R. (2010). "Honoring children, mending the circle: Cultural adaptation of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for American Indian and Alaska Native children." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(8), 847-856.
- 2 Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Elkins, J., Tafoya, G., Bird, D., & Salvador, M. (2012). "Wicasa Was'aka: Restoring the traditional strength of American Indian males." *American Journal of Public Health*, 102(S2), 177-183.
- 3 Brave Heart, M. Y. H. (2003). "The historical trauma response among Natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration." *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 35(1), 7-13.
- 4 Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, D. S. (2008). "Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations." *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1/2), 51-66.
- 5 Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, D. S. (2008). "Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations." *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1/2), 51-66.
- 6 Willmon-Haque, S., & BigFoot, D. S. (2008). "Violence and the effects of trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native populations." *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 8(1/2), 51-66.
- 7 Rogers, M., & Giroux, J. (2012). "Domestic violence in American Indian communities: Background, culture, and legal issues." *Health and Social Issues of Native American Women*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- 8 Manson, S. M., Beals, J., Klein, S. A., Croy, C. D., & AI-SUPERPFP Team. (2005). "Social epidemiology of trauma among two American Indian reservation population." *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(5), 851-859.
- 9 BigFoot, D. (n.d.). Suicide and other trauma within Native American communities. *The Dialogue*. pp. 15-18. doi:10.1037/e592932009-004
- 10 Deters, P. B., Novins, D. K., Fickenscher, A., & Beals, J. (2006). "Trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder symptomatology: Patterns among American Indian adolescents in substance abuse treatment." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76(3), 335-345.
- 11 Gone, J. P. (2004). "Mental health services for Native Americans in the 21st century United States." *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1), 10-18.
- 12 BigFoot, D., & Schmidt, S. R. (2010). "Honoring children, mending the circle: Cultural adaptation of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy for American Indian and Alaska Native children." *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(8), 847-856.
- 13 Novins, D. K., King, M., & Stone, L. S. (2004). "Developing a plan for measuring outcomes in model systems of care for American Indian and Alaska Native children and youth." *American Indian & Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 11(2), 88-96.
- 14 Strickland, C. L., Walsh, E., & Cooper, M. (2006). "Healing fractured families: Parents' and elders' perspectives on the impact of colonization and youth suicide prevention in a Pacific Northwest American Indian tribe." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 17(1), 5-12.

## Helpful Resources

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC)**

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac>

**SAMHSA Behavioral Health Disaster Response Mobile App**

Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/PEP13-DKAPP-1>

**American Indian and Alaska Native Culture Card**

Website: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/American-Indian-and-Alaska-Native-Culture-Card/SMA08-4354>

**SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline**

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990 Text "TalkWithUs" to 66746

Website: <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov>

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)  
TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (1-800-799-4889)

Website: <http://www.samhsa.gov>

*This resource can be found by accessing the Suicide Prevention Lifeline box once on the SAMHSA website.*

**Indian Health Service\***

Responsible for providing health services to members of federally recognized tribes.

Website: <http://www.ihs.gov>

**U.S. Department of the Interior\***

**Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Leaders Directory**

Website: <http://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/public/documents/text/idc002652.pdf>

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management\***

Online course: Working Effectively with Tribal Governments (available only to federal employees)

Website: <http://www.tribal.golearnportal.org/>

*\*Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*



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